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ONE HUNDRED TENTH CONGRESS

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Washington, DC 20515-6115

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November 8, 2007

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The Honorable David M. Walker
Comptroller General
United States Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Comptroller General Walker:

The Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations continues to monitor the recent federal expansion of high-containment biosafety laboratories and the possible gaps in federal and institutional oversight. In order to ensure that these laboratories are operating safely and making improvements to strengthen lab safety, it is necessary to evaluate recurring hazardous incidents and operational problems. However, we have heard from various scientists and biosafety experts that a number of infections, operational issues, and "near misses" are not being reported because of concerns related to fear of punishment, loss of funding and potential liability. Without consistent reporting, important lessons cannot be learned and potentially life-threatening accidents may not be avoided.

During the Subcommittee hearing on October 4, 2007, a witness testified about the possibility of implementing an anonymous, no-fault reporting system. One possible analogous model mentioned was the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) system for reporting aviation incidents, administered by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). Other possibilities include industry-initiated reporting systems in place for nuclear and chemical laboratories.

Accordingly, in support of our ongoing interest in ensuring and strengthening the safety of high-containment biolaboratories, we request that the GAO examine no-fault, anonymous reporting systems currently facilitated by government agencies and industry. Additionally, we request that you provide insights into the efficacy of such programs and what lessons can be learned from the actual experiences of interested parties.

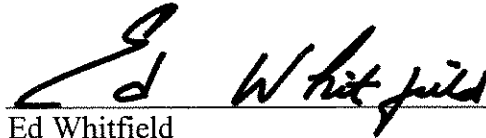
We ask that you provide the Committee with the results of your review at the earliest possible opportunity and that, in conducting your work, please provide the Committee staff with periodic updates on the status of your review.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this request. If you have any questions, please contact us or have your staff contact Krista Carpenter with the Minority Committee staff at (202) 225-3641.

Sincerely,



Joe Barton
Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Commerce



Ed Whitfield
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

cc: The Honorable John Dingell, Chairman
Committee on Energy and Commerce
The Honorable Bart Stupak, Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations